

Verde Independent

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School districts turn focus to curriculum alignment

Teachers creating pathway for IB students from MVP to MUHS

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Staff Reporter

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COTTONWOOD - With override efforts behind them, members of the Cottonwood-Oak Creek and Mingus Union High School boards met Thursday night to discuss the next steps in sharing services.

This first meeting since the election focused on ensuring a pathway from Mountain View Preparatory's IB curriculum to a pilot program with the same components at Mingus, and streamlining math education between the COCSD schools.



VVN/Yvonne Gonzalez

Members of the COCSD and MUHSD boards met Thursday night to discuss curriculum alignment and shared services.

MVP to MUHS

Mountain View Preparatory is an International Baccalaureate candidate school where students are taught Spanish from kindergarten through eighth grade in a curriculum that integrates an international focus with Common Core Standards.

COCSD board president Jason Finger said the process of bringing IB to the district started several years ago.

"It's been very successful but created a lot of fear as to how we're going to meet the needs of this group of students who have a little different curriculum than we have in the rest of our district," Finger said.

Amy Romero, IB coordinator and Title 1 teacher at MVP, has been working with Tyler Novak, director of art and humanities at Mingus, to create an academic pathway for the current eighth grade cohort that will start high school next fall.

Novak told the members of the two boards that Mingus implemented a new program this year that incorporates performing and fine arts and world studies with core subjects. Students take classes like pre-AP English, world studies and drama.

"It's a cohesive learning environment taking all the subject areas and lining them up, which is, again, I believe an IB philosophy," Novak said. "We're trying to build a culture and community of academic rigor."

The original idea was to have a separate high school for MVP, but Romero said not doing that means students from the entire COCSD have access to Mingus's IB-like curriculum.

MVP has 440 students and about 250 additional names on a waiting list.

"It started off as a way to transition the MVP kids and it's turned into a great opportunity for all the students in the district," Romero said. "There is no waiting list for the high school, so those kids will get into the program."

Yavapai County School Superintendent Tim Carter facilitated the meeting, and said this curriculum alignment is rare from schools that come from different districts.

Carter serves on the Arizona Ready Education Council, a body formed by Gov. Jan Brewer in 2011.

"We take about 30 minutes at the beginning of each one of our meetings and look at a different aspect of the Common Core and how it's being implemented," Carter said. "One of the areas that is coming up in the next couple of months is going to be to try to identify folks who are integrating elementary curriculum into a unified curriculum."

He said because it's rare that elementary districts are working with high schools, he'd suggest Novak and Romero be added to the next meeting agenda to present the work they've done.

"In unified districts it's a little different, but in rural Arizona, for example, we have a lot of unified districts like Prescott that serve five independent elementary districts," Carter said. "A lot of times, those conversations are not happening."

Math task force

Teachers from the three districts discussed concerns during a joint administrative meeting about the diversity in math curriculum, which the task force will work to eliminate.

"Math is going to be our focus for a while," COCSD Superintendent Barbara U'Ren said. "That was the drive by the three districts there."

Mingus Superintendent Paul Tighe said transitioning to Common Core creates an opportunity to discuss horizontal and vertical curriculum alignment.

"We're looking at, as kids transition from grade level to grade level, and then in high school, course to course," Tighe said. "And then, horizontally, are fourth graders in each school getting the same experiences - ultimately, for us, that means incoming freshmen have gotten the same preparation."

MUHS Board President Jim Ledbetter suggested an easy-to-access, online snapshot of graduation requirements on schools' home pages. U'Ren said that would be a good idea so parents can know where students are headed.

Other collaborations

The districts started sharing a business advisory team this year made up of the chamber of commerce, local economic development experts and financial advisers, among others.

"This is an economic investment into a strong community," U'Ren said. "We're really excited to share that because we have limited businesses and if we're all tapping into them at a different level, it kind of wears them out."

Schools can spend hours in human resources playing phone tag with each other and substitute

teachers, arranging who could be where and when. To solve that problem, Tighe said COCSD and Mingus are going to start using an automated system currently in place at the Sedona Unified School District.

"We share subs with Sedona already," Tighe said. "So since we also share subs with each other, what it allows the sub to do is see all the districts when they log in, and they can see what's available and pick things up."

U'Ren said there have been two meetings of district administrators, one of which the Clarkdale-Jerome School attended. The boards agreed that CJS should be invited to participate in the joint meetings of the boards and administrators.

Tighe said the districts are working to phase into one transportation director and, eventually, one transportation department, a two-fold transition.

"We're meeting again in the near future, identifying some of the issues that have come up," Tighe said. "There's great opportunities for increased collaboration and shared services in transportation alone."

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Verde Independent

Saturday, November 30, 2013

Editorial: School districts' shared services no longer a joke

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Last summer, Cottonwood-Oak Creek School Board President Jason Finger said the ongoing talk of shared services between his district and Mingus Union had begun to "sound like a joke."

It was all talk and no action, Mr. Finger observed.

That does not seem to be the case less than six months later.

Last week, the two school boards met and shared that considerable progress has been made on forging a course from Mountain View Preparatory's IB curriculum to a pilot program with the same components at Mingus, and streamlining math education between the two school districts.



Jason Finger

Amy Romero, IB coordinator and Title 1 teacher at MVP, has been working with Tyler Novak, director of art and humanities at Mingus, to create an academic pathway for the current eighth grade cohort that will start high school next fall.

Yavapai County School Superintendent Tim Carter noted that this curriculum alignment is rare from schools that come from different districts. He wants to use the Mingus-COC example in a presentation before Gov. Jan Brewer's Arizona Ready Education Council to show the rest of the state how it can be done.

Likewise, Mingus, Cottonwood-Oak Creek and Clarkdale-Jerome all are working cooperatively to eliminate the current diversity in math curriculum and create a seamless transition through each elementary and middle school grade level to the high school based on the Common Core standards.

Continuing this spirit of cooperation, Mingus and Cottonwood-Oak Creek have joined forces on a local business advisory team as well as the creation of an automated system for sharing and scheduling substitute teachers. The districts also are working to phase into one transportation director and, eventually, one transportation department.

Today, it's clearly obvious that constructive dialogue combined with demonstrated action between Cottonwood-Oak Creek and Mingus, as well as Clarkdale-Jerome, is anything but a joke.

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